

Identification Notes: Friarbirds (*Philemon* spp.)

The Northern Territory has three species of Friarbird, one species occurring as two forms:

- Helmeted Friarbird *Philemon buceroides*
 - sandstone form, ssp. *ammitophila*
 - coastal form, ssp. *gordoni*
- Silver-crowned Friarbird *Philemon argenticeps*
- Little Friarbird *Philemon citreogularis*

Both the Silver-crowned and Little Friarbird are widespread in treed areas of the Top End, whereas the Helmeted Friarbird has a much more restricted and curiously patchy distribution. The sandstone race is known only from the immediate vicinity of the Arnhem Land Plateau (e.g. Kakadu National Park), where it occurs in monsoon rain-forest patches and woodland. The coastal race is found in and around Darwin, on the Tiwi Islands and on Gove Peninsula. It is usually found in mangroves or coastal vine thickets and especially where the two habitats occur close to each other. The coastal race has also taken to suburban Darwin, where in some areas it is one of the most abundant birds. There have been reports of Helmeted Friarbirds from other places and habitats in the Top End, but these require confirmation (so if you see one, please take careful notes!). No Friarbird species occur in central Australia.

Identifying friarbirds in the Top End has been a problem because the field guides are wrong and quite misleading, and even some published photographs have been mislabeled. The following table of key characters and illustrations in Fig. 1 should assist identification. Caution is required in judging colour, as the facial skin of all species can appear dark in less than perfect light.

Although all friarbirds have a somewhat raucous call, there are consistent differences that with a good ear and a little practice are very useful for identification. There are also differences in size, but this is less reliable as there is overlap and size can be hard to judge. The forms of friarbirds in order of increasing size are: Little; Silver-crowned; Helmeted (coastal); Helmeted (sandstone); with a quite substantial difference between the two races of the Helmeted Friarbird.

This note was modified by Don Franklin and Richard Noske from the following article:
Noske R. and McCrie N. (1990) Identification spot: friarbirds. *Bird Atlas of Darwin Newsletter* 2, 2.

Table 1. Key characters that assist identification of friarbirds in the Northern Territory

| character | <i>Helmeted</i> | <i>Silver-crowned</i> | <i>Little</i> |
|---|---|-----------------------------|---|
| Casque or knob on the head. | low and shallow in profile, not obvious | steep-sided and prominent * | absent |
| Shape of the facial skin behind the eye | rounded | projects backwards | does not extend above <i>and</i> behind the eye |
| Colour of the bare facial skin | dark grey, almost black | jet black | bluish-grey |
| Colour of the crown feathers | pale brownish-white | silvery-white | mid-brown |
| Nape ruff | ruff present | ruff prominent | no ruff |

* less so in young birds



Helmeted Friarbird



Silver-crowned Friarbird

Figure 1. Heads of Helmeted and Silver-crowned Friarbird, illustrating differences in casque, facial skin and ruff.